

# The Parousia of Christ

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A Writer in The Homiletic Review several years ago (December, 1901), in an article entitled "The End of the World," cited the teaching of Lightfoot, Owen, Hammond, Warren, Russell, and others on that subject, and also on the parousia of Christ, acknowledging the excellence of their scholarship, but doubting that they "had made good their interpretation."

A few years ago, having occasion to make a special study of the parousia, and not finding myself in accord with traditional teachings with regard to it, I turned to my Greek New Testament, with the result that, though at the time unacquainted with the views of the men just mentioned, I came to hold substantially the same ideas relative to the parousia that these men held. Naturally enough, it was pleasing to find that such eminent scholars held such views, and no one need wonder if I think that these men "have made good their interpretation."

Probably no theory on a subject of this kind can be so formulated as to escape all objection and all difficulty. If we hold any definite ideas on this doctrine, we are shut up to the choice of three views—the premillennial, the postmillennial, or the one taught by Warren, Russell, and others. The doctrine as wrought out by them appears to harmonize with more Scripture and it strikes the judgment as more reasonable than any other. It may be called the spiritual theory of the parousia, in distinction from the commonly received

physical or material theory. It holds that Christ's return was not to be in the flesh, like His going away, but by His Spirit; that it is not so much a single event as a series of events or a dispensation.

Much is made of the fact that the Greek word "parousia" means primarily "presence," rather than "coming." The revisers take a step toward the recognition of this fact by introducing into the marginal reading the word "presence"; but, owing no doubt to the preoccupation of their minds by traditional ideas, they failed to put it into the text where some of us believe it belongs.

Prof. W. Adams Brown, in his article on parousia in Hastings' Bible Dictionary, expresses himself as of the opinion that Dr. Warren goes too far in excluding all idea of "coming" from the Greek word—an implied admission very gratifying to those who believe as Dr. Warren does.

Believers in the bodily return of our Lord make much of the phrase "in like manner," as it stands in both versions of Acts i. 11: "This Jesus which was received up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him going into heaven." The only other passages where the Greek words translated "in like manner" here, are used may be found in Matt, xxiii. 87, Luke xiii. 34, Acts vii. 25, and 2 Tim. iii. 8. Commenting on the latter passage, Meyer says: "The correlative does not necessarily place emphasis on the similarity of the *manner* of the act, but often only on the similarity of the act itself." A careful examination of the passages above referred to will lead unprejudiced students to make a stronger statement still, that the comparison is *never* one concerning the manner of the act, but concerning the act itself.

Now what are some of the advantages of a spiritual view of Christ's parousia?

I. It relieves us from the necessity of believing that our Lord was Himself mistaken concerning the time of His return. He speaks of it always as likely to occur within the lifetime of His disciples. Says Dean Farrar:

"It was to this event [the destruction of Jerusalem], the most awful in history, that we must apply those prophecies of Christ's coming in which every one of the apostles and evangelists describe it as near at hand. To those prophecies our Lord Himself fixed these three most definite limitations—the one, that before that generation passed away all these things would be fulfilled; another, that some standing there would not taste death till they saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom; the third, that the apostles should not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come. It is strange that

these distinct limitations should not be regarded as a decisive proof that the fall of Jerusalem was, in the fullest manner, the second advent of the Son of Man, which was primarily contemplated by the earliest voices of prophecy" ("Early Days of Christianity," p. 489).

Dr. Lyman Abbott, commenting on the first of these passages, says:

"Not till Pentecost did or could He fulfil the promise of His second and spiritual coming to abide in the hearts of His disciples. That promise was fulfilled at the day of Pentecost by the descent of the Holy Spirit; for the clearly marked distinction between the three persons of the Godhead belongs to a later epoch in theology, and Christ Himself speaks of the coming of the Spirit and His own coming as one."

In this last phrase is lodged the true doctrine of the parousia. The second of these passages Dr. Abbott also makes refer to Pentecost, but, in his note on the verse immediately preceding, that acute commentator gets tangled in tradition: "For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of the Father, with his angels, and then shall he reward every man according to his works" (Matt. xvi. 27).

Two things, Dr. Abbott says, keep him from interpreting this as referring to Pentecost: (1) Christ did not then come in glory; (2) nor with His angels. Hence they must refer to the last judgment. But what kind of glory can he be expecting if tongues of fire, three thousand converts, marvelous displays of spiritual power, speaking with other tongues, do not constitute "glory"? And why can he be so sure that angels were not present on that occasion?

II. The spiritual interpretation does away with the necessity of attributing to Scripture a double meaning, an application to two events, one near, the other remote. Those who make the advent of our Lord physical and still in the future must read into Jesus' talk to His disciples concerning the destruction of Jerusalem a double meaning. To such, Matt. xxiv. appears to be a perfect patchwork of prophecy, without consistency or coherency, parts of one discourse being jumbled in confusion with another, the fall of Jerusalem and the last judgment strangely mixed and blended. Such a view gives little credit to Matthew as an historian, or to inspiration as a guide to orderly narration.

Most commentators stumble over verses 29-31 of that chapter as employing imagery that can not be referred to the fall of Jerusalem. Even Prof. W. Adams Brown, treating the spiritual view with fairness and candor, in his parousia article above referred to, cannot quite see how this language can

apply to the Jerusalem event. Yet when one makes careful comparison of these words (verses 29-31) with the language Peter uses on the day of Pentecost, quoting Joel, it is not difficult to refer even these to the destruction of Jerusalem. Quoting Joel, Peter says:

"I will show wonders in heaven above  
And signs on the earth beneath;  
Blood and fire and vapor of smoke;  
The sun shall be turned into darkness,  
And the moon into blood,  
Before the day of the Lord come,  
That great and notable day."

If that vivid and picturesque description can be applied to so spiritual an event as the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, why should we get staggered by similar application of the poetic figures of the Old Testament which Peter and other apostles use, referring to similar spiritual phenomena?

That verses 29-31 should, in the thought of any, be ruled out from their place in this chapter as referring, with the other verses, to the destruction of Jerusalem, seems the more strange since they are packed full of words which betray their common origin. In the fifteenth verse Jesus had quoted Daniel concerning the "abomination of desolation in the holy place," thus showing that He was connecting in His own mind the language of Daniel with the supreme event in Jewish history toward which the prophecies of Daniel point. Now these verses 29-31 contain words and phrases peculiar to the Book of Daniel, and used in the sense peculiar to prophecy: I mean "sun and moon and stars and clouds of heaven," as well as the phrase "Son of Man." This is the imagery of judgment, and judgment upon Jerusalem. Understanding, then, the chapter as referring consistently throughout to the destruction of Jerusalem, the topic with which it starts, we avoid the necessity of a puerile and unworthy exegesis.

III. This view is in harmony with a progressive revelation of God to man, which, in the nature of the case, needs to be increasingly spiritual. God is spirit (John iv. 24), and to be best understood must be spiritually revealed. Any lower form of revelation, as through dreams, angels, visions, incarnations, is a poorer and more imperfect kind. The Bible itself is the history of a progressive revelation. Every successive manifestation of Deity appears to be to the profounder spiritual consciousness of humanity. For our Lord to return to earth in physical form would be a backward step in a progressive revelation. When our Lord said to His disciples that it was expedient for them

that He go away, He might have meant, in fact, because, as long as He tarried with them, He would stand in the way of that idealization which was necessary. But more than that, He would be hindered from that individual ministry to each which would make good His promise to be with them even unto the end of the world. He might have meant still more: that God's revelation of Himself must go on, deepening in spiritual significance. If God never repeats Himself even in the making of leaves and grasses, but gives to each a distinct individuality, is He likely to do so in the grandest operations of Deity, the revelation of Himself to man? It is significant that the writer of the New Testament who knew Jesus best, and was by nature the best fitted to understand our Lord, makes a spiritual interpretation of parousia.

Prof. W. Adams Brown writes:

"With the Fourth Gospel we find ourselves transported into a different atmosphere. The coming at the last day is not, indeed, denied, but it is no longer the center of interest. The coining on which Jesus lays most stress in His farewell words to His disciples is not His judicial coming at the end of the age, but His personal advent to His disciples, whether physical at His resurrection or spiritual in the gift of the Paraclete. This fact is the more significant because these discourses take the place, in the Fourth Gospel, of the Apocalypse of the Synoptics, with its prediction of the parousia and the destruction of Jerusalem. The day to which reference is repeatedly made in these discourses is not the 'last day' of the judgment, but the gospel dispensation."

The last day, according to John, "is not the judgment day, but the gospel dispensation." Exactly; this is the spiritual view of the parousia. It is significant, too, that Paul, the profoundest mind among the apostles, should also come to hold at the last the same idea. It would take too much space to enter into the proof of this minutely. It will be conceded that Paul taught a spiritual resurrection in contradistinction to a flesh-and-blood resurrection. His earlier, half-Judaistic idea of a visible advent, a universal resurrection of the sleeping dead, and a great judgment scene, gave place, it is said by many like Sabatier and Beyschlag, to a more spiritual theory of the soul's entrance through death into its perfected heavenly state and full communion with Christ (compare the portion of the article "Parousia" in Hastings' Bible Dictionary which treats of Paul's teaching on the subject).

IV. The spiritual conception of the parousia accords with an optimistic view of the world and God's purposes concerning it.

To the most of those who make a literal interpretation of Christ's return and of those conditions preceding it, at which time He will set up a literal kingdom upon the earth and reign as He refused to reign at His first coming, the world appears to present the wretched and discouraging spectacle of growing daily worse and worse. The end of all things, too, is the destruction of the world by fire. In the article referred to at the beginning of this paper, its author confesses that "the only passage of Scripture which speaks explicitly and at length of the end of the world is 2 Peter iii. 3-13." Without more than referring to the fact that 2d Peter has a somewhat doubtful standing among the best biblical scholars, let me remind the reader that the same principle of interpretation which Peter himself used on the day of Pentecost concerning a passage from Joel would obviate the necessity of believing that the world is finally to be burned with fire.

To believe that the world is daily growing worse does not harmonize with healthy optimism. It pronounces, in effect, the Gospel of Jesus Christ a failure. I believe in the optimism of God. At the end of each creative period God said that His work was good, and at the end of the creative work He said that it was very good. I do not believe that the devil has ever caused Him to reverse His judgment. Evil will be finally overcome. The disciplinary machinery of our earthly life will some time be no longer needed. Good is the dominant note in the creation, and will some time prevail. The spiritual rulership of Christ, inaugurated at Pentecost, and carried forward till every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, or till His "kingdom ruleth over all," is undoubtedly the grand consummation of all earthly and heavenly processes.

V. Lastly, the spiritual idea of Christ's coming is the better view, because a full belief in that view would renew the Pentecostal vitality and energies of the church; would cause Christians to make more of a present Christ, a living, loving Lord, abiding all the time in the hearts of believers, just as really and just as vitally as He lived with the twelve in Galilee; and this faith would surely renew the energies of the Christian church, causing Pentecostal seasons to come more frequently, revivals to spring up everywhere, and God's Word to move throughout the world more swiftly. Says Dr. Clarke of Colgate: "The church has been led to regard herself as the widow and not the bride of Christ. . . . What is needed in order to awaken a worthier activity in the church is a faith that discerns Him as actually here in His kingdom." The coming of the King and the coming of the kingdom are one and the same.

The kingdom cometh not with observation. It is something within us. It makes no outward display of glare or noise. "The coming again that Jesus thought of

is evolutionary, not catastrophic—in spirit, not in form" ([Dr. Whiton](#)). As Dr. Gladden expresses it:

"The disciples of Christ have been offering the prayer, 'Thy kingdom come.' The prayer is answered, century by century, and day by day. The kingdom does come. It continues to come, in stronger force, with wider sway, as the years go on. But how? Only as men change their minds and give it freer entrance to their lives and larger authority over them."